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Carlos Navarro

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by Carlos Navarro
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In November 2011, Juan de Dios Castro Muñoz, then director of Mexico’s literacy-promotion institute (Instituto Nacional para la Educación de los Adultos, INEA), predicted that Mexico would meet an international target to eradicate illiteracy by 2016. Speaking to reporters, Castro Muñoz said he was confident that Mexico could meet the target established by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to bring illiteracy down to less than 4% within the next five years.

In 2014, almost three years after Castro Muñoz made that bold—and perhaps unrealistic—prediction, literacy rates in Mexico have shown improvement but remain far short of the UNESCO target. In 2011, the number of Mexicans unable to read and write was estimated at about 6 million. In June 2014, Castro Muñoz’s successor at INEA, Alfredo Llorente Martínez, estimated the number of Mexicans who are illiterate at 5.4 million. Llorente acknowledged that more than 6% of Mexico’s population aged 15 or older remains illiterate, which is short of the UNESCO target.

The INEA director said 10.1 million Mexicans, about 11.8% of Mexico’s population over 15, have not completed elementary school and another 16.4 million, or about 20% of the country’s population, have not completed secondary education.

Still, some experts believe that the INEA statistics do not provide a complete picture. "The proportion of the Mexican population that is literate is going up, but in absolute numbers, there are more illiterate people in Mexico now than there were 12 years ago," said David Toscana, author of the novel El último lector (The Last Reader).

In a column published in The New York Times, Toscana said the problem exists even though more children are in school now than at any point in the history of Mexico, and Toscana blamed the problem on a deficient education system. "How is it possible that I hand over a child for six hours every day, five days a week, and you give me back someone who is basically illiterate?" asked Toscana.

Could reforms to public-education system fix problem?

Some have blamed the substandard public-education system in Mexico on poorly trained teachers who have been allowed to continue on the job even though they lack the necessary skills. President Enrique Peña Nieto cited poor teacher training and other problems with the public schools as a contributing factor in Mexico’s illiteracy problems. In 2013, the Peña Nieto government pushed through an education-reform package that, among other things, required teachers to obtain more training and undergo a stricter certification process (SourceMex, Dec. 12, 2012, March 6, 2013, and April, 17, 2013).

There have been other recent efforts to improve educational levels in Mexico. In 2012, the Mexican Congress approved a constitutional reform making high school education compulsory (SourceMex, Feb. 15, 2012).
Some studies point to other factors that inhibit learning besides a lack of teacher competence. "The key to raising achievement in Mexico’s 251,037 schools (with enrollment of almost 34 million students in the academic term 2009-2010) is to develop the conditions for school leaders and teachers to place student learning at the center of their efforts," said a report published by the Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD) in November 2013. "Particular to Mexico are the facts that 21% of all primary schools have only one classroom or are multi-grade (teachers instructing two or more grades simultaneously) and there are many rural schools for indigenous populations."

The OECD report acknowledged that Mexico’s educational performance has improved in recent years, particularly when it comes to younger students. "[Mexico] has raised participation in early childhood education to almost 100%, with some of the highest enrollments across OECD. Children aged 5 to 14 are attaining primary and lower secondary education, but there is a gap in upper secondary enrollment, graduation and performance," said the report, entitled Education Policy Outlook Mexico.

A separate OECD report, the Program for International Student Assessment (Programa para la Evaluación de Alumnos, PISA), confirmed that Mexico was one of a handful of countries in the 34-member bloc where secondary education lagged. The report said that, in 32 of the OECD member nations, 90% of the population over 15 had completed a secondary education. Mexico was one of two nations where the rate was only 70%. "While the rate of secondary schooling has increased, going from 58% in 2003 to 70% in 2012, we have one of the lowest rates of countries that participated in the PISA 2012."

The report said competency rates for secondary students in Mexico were low for mathematics, science, and reading. The PISA survey found that 41% of secondary students in Mexico did not attain basic reading competency.

Mexicans don’t read enough
In his column published in The New York Times, Toscana said the culture of reading is being de-emphasized in Mexico, which has contributed to the overall level of illiteracy in the country. "Even if baseline literacy, the ability to read a street sign or news bulletin, is rising, the practice of reading an actual book is not," said the author. "Once a reasonably well-educated country, Mexico took the penultimate spot, out of 108 countries, in a UNESCO assessment of reading habits a few years ago."

Others agree that merely learning to read and write is not sufficient. "The first thing you need to know is that it is not sufficient to read and write. Literacy should be accompanied by the ability to interpret social, political, and economic realities, which should be used to construct a better country," columnist Marcelo Salinas wrote in the daily newspaper Novedades Quintana Roo.

New literacy campaign
The discouraging literacy results have prompted the INEA to launch a new campaign to improve literacy rates. The effort, known as the Campaña Nacional de Alfabetización y Reducción del Rezago Educativo, will put emphasis on Oaxaca, Chiapas, Veracruz, Guerrero, Michoacán, Veracruz, Puebla, and México states, where illiteracy rates are highest.

INEA is working on the effort with other federal programs that work with low-income populations in rural areas, such as Oportunidades and the Consejo Nacional de Fomento Educativo (CONAFE).
Llorente said the Peña Nieto administration has committed to allocate an additional 1.5 billion pesos (US$115 million) for the campaign, on top of the 2.2 billion pesos (US$170 million) already approved for the effort in 2014.

A major effort, said Llorente, is to develop opportunities in each local community or village for people to learn to read and write. "From our perspective, the trainers should be in the same communities that they will serve," said the INEA director. "Many students currently drop out because of the distances they have to travel to reach the classes where they are taught to read and write."

The INEA director stressed that the INEA goal is to reduce illiteracy to 4% or less by 2018, which means teaching an additional 2.2 million Mexicans to read and write. "We want to reach a goal that has not been attained in the last five presidential administrations," Llorente said.

**Illiterate public servants**

For some, a disturbing reality is that illiteracy extends to some in leadership positions in Mexico. While some leaders who have obtained a higher education, including President Enrique Peña Nieto, have been criticized for not reading enough books (SourceMex, Dec. 7, 2011), other politicians cannot read at all.

The problem of illiteracy among public servants is most prevalent in small rural communities, where many of those who serve in government are unable to read and write. Llorente Martínez said some 18,000 people who were elected, appointed, or hired to serve in government are illiterate. "Some of them are mayors," said the INEA director.

The problem is especially prevalent in poor rural communities. For example, the Federación Nacional del Municipios de México (FENAMM) estimates that 20% of the mayors in Oaxaca are unable to read or write, which means they are not adequately prepared to fully carry out the duties for which they were elected.

FENAMM president Barbara Botello says the situation is unacceptable, as anyone who serves the public should be required to have a certain level of preparation. "They often have to make decisions regarding public resources, obtained from the citizens via taxes," said Botello.

Botello said there is an urgent need to develop guidelines that require anyone seeking to serve in a public capacity to have some college preparation, or at least be able to pass an exam to determine their aptitude.

"We are pushing for the professionalization of public service in the municipalities of our country, and, in case they do not have the skills, they must be willing to undergo the training required for their position," said Botello. "Public officials at all levels have the obligation to consistently undergo the necessary training that allows them to become more efficient in their jobs." [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on July 2, 2014, reported at 12.99 pesos per US$1.00.]

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